

Whitney Museum of American Art
July 3–August 30, 1987

Alternate Routes: Through the Permanent Collection

SPACE

LIGHT

MOTION



Space, light, and motion have been among the most exciting areas of scientific advancement in the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, they have also challenged the imagination of artists. Whether in realistic or abstract works, artists have made space, light, and motion significant forces in modern painting and sculpture.

The texts and questions in this brochure are designed to reveal the rich and diverse ways in which American artists have responded to these themes, and to encourage exploration and dialogue between the works of art and ourselves, and among all who share the viewing experience.



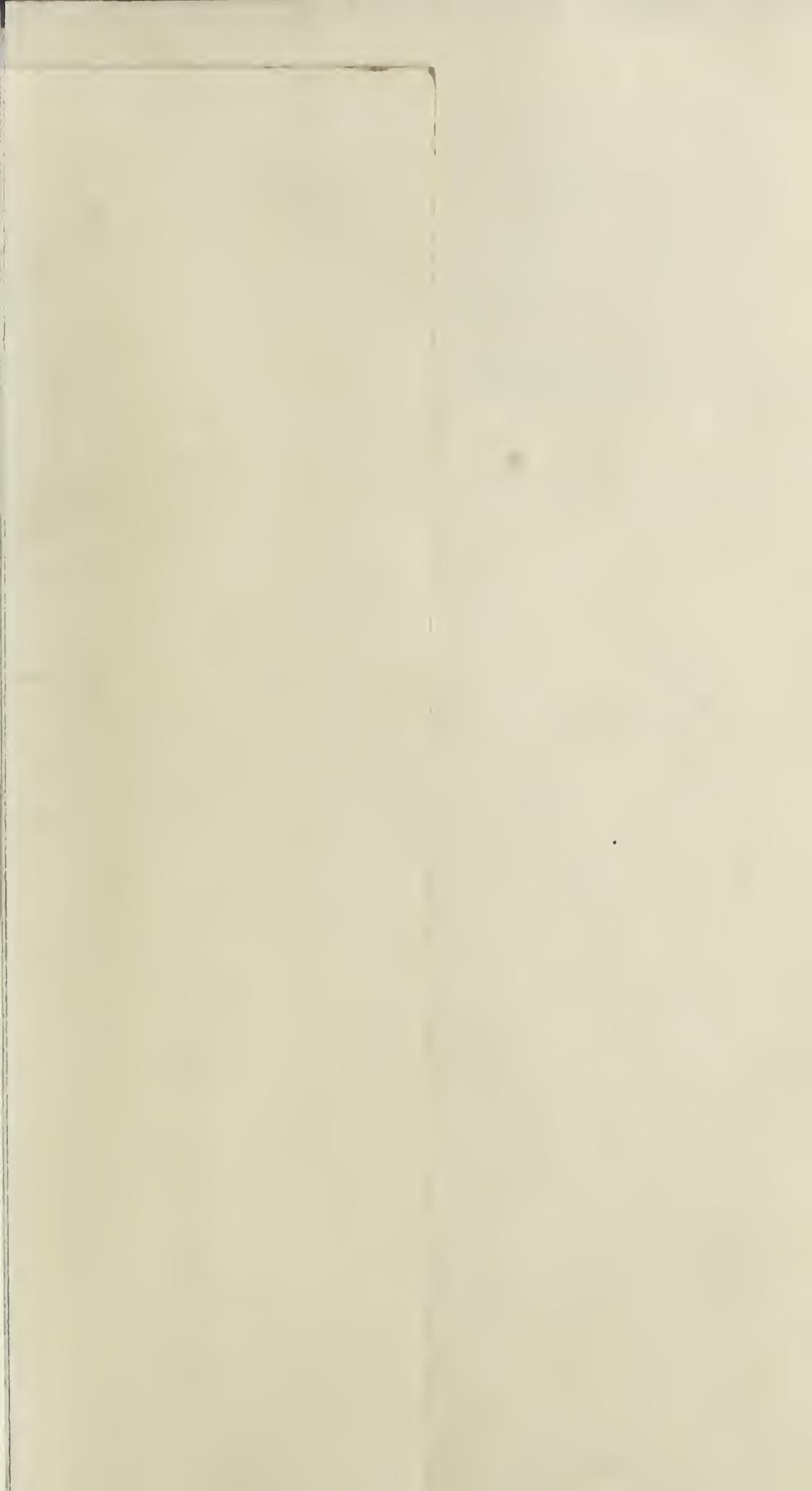
Cover.


Jonathan Borofsky

Running People at 2,616,216, 1979

Latex paint on wall and/or ceiling,
dimensions variable

Purchase, with funds from the Painting and
Sculpture Committee 84.43





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The works are arranged here in the order that the viewer will encounter them in the Third Floor Permanent Collection installation.

The viewer who wishes to explore Space, Light, and Motion separately can follow the color-coded routes.

Note: individual works may be temporarily changed.

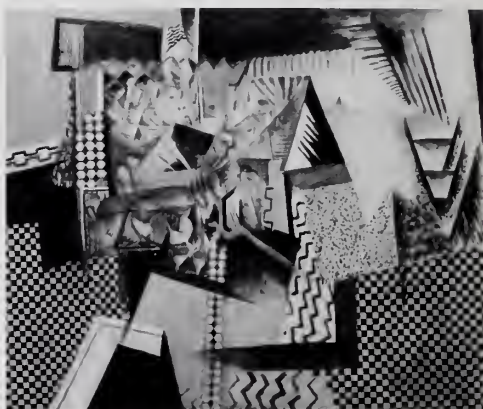
This brochure was prepared by the Public Education Department in conjunction with the exhibition "Alternate Routes: Through the Permanent Collection," July 3–August 30, 1987.

To Review . . .

To Consider . . .

To Note . . .

Design: Nicki Kalish
Photographs by Geoffrey Clements,
except for the Segal and Smith by
Jerry L. Thompson



Maurice Prendergast

It takes an imaginative leap today to realize that the painter of this joyous little picture was considered highly avant-garde in his time. But, in fact, Prendergast freely adapted the French modernist technique known as Pointillism, where tiny dots of juxtaposed colors suggest the changing light on forms. Unlike the more systematic French, Prendergast uses patches of thickly brushed color to weave an idyllic fantasy through light and an all-over harmonious texture.

One of the Impressionists' early concerns had been to capture the fleeting effect of light and color at a particular time of day. Prendergast's light bathes the entire painting, almost eliminating the passing shadows that might suggest the hour or give the figures an earthly, physical presence. Where has he used shadows and why? What function is served by the dark outlines around the figures and other elements and the omission of details in the faces? Despite the movement of the figures, the scene seems very still. Why?

In 1913, Prendergast visited the Armory Show in New York, the large, historic exhibition that introduced Americans to the advanced work of European modernists like Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse. He sketched four works by Matisse there, and this influence can be felt in the expressively distorted nude figure in the foreground of *The Promenade*, completed that same year.

The Promenade, 1913
Oil on canvas, 30 × 34 inches
Alexander M. Bing Bequest 60.10

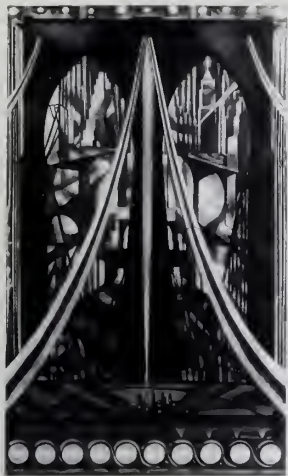
Max Weber

For Max Weber in 1915, as for many others, it was no longer sufficient to model solid forms in space and arrange them in linear perspective, that is, from a stable, fixed point of view. Like the Cubists, he wanted to depict what the mind understood, not what the eye perceived. He re-ordered the elements of a scene to imply more than one view at a time, set them in an ambiguous, shifting space, and on a surface whose flatness was not only recognized, but emphasized. *Chinese Restaurant* also owes something to the Futurists, the Italian avant-garde artists who used every possible device to try to bring motion into painting.

Although the restaurant cannot be logically reconstructed from the elements in Weber's painting, we can isolate some of the devices he uses to build his new structure. What kind of space or motion do the following elements help to create?: the tilting of intersecting planes, the "rhyming" of shapes, the staggered repetition of human faces, the balancing of the dark areas, the distribution of reds and pinks, the use of collage (pieces of paper glued to the canvas)?

The discovery of photography and cinema is often credited with freeing artists from their traditional roles of reporting and recording, thereby helping to launch the modernist adventure. Together with advances such as transatlantic wireless and manned flight, photography and the cinema also helped enlarge our concept of space, and probably influenced the Cubists' interest in a simultaneous "take" of many views of the same scene. Weber was also fascinated by the fourth dimension and the relation of space to time.

Chinese Restaurant, 1915
Oil on canvas, 40 × 48 inches
Purchase 31.382



Joseph Stella

Joseph Stella's romance with the Brooklyn Bridge began in 1917. This is the fifth of six major paintings on the subject. He shared with the Italian Futurists a love for technology and the machine; the bridge with its sweeping cables, bustling traffic, and skyscrapers looming just ahead became for him "the shrine containing all the efforts of the new civilization of America."

Bridge cables rise upward with the zeal of a church spire. Gothic arches frame a Manhattan skyline that glows like a stained-glass window. A central, plunging blue line takes us down, doubling as a traffic divider and a hint of a beautiful day. Stella seizes the bridge in its totality, at daytime and nighttime; lights above pose as stars and lights below flash to the beat of the subway. In what ways does he give us the sense of back and forth movement across the bridge?

Stella wrote: "Many nights I stood on the bridge—and in the middle alone—lost—a defenseless prey to the surrounding swarming darkness—crushed by the mountainous black impenetrability of the skyscrapers. . . . I felt deeply moved, as if on the threshold of a new religion or in the presence of a new DIVINITY."

The Brooklyn Bridge: Variation on an Old Theme, 1939
Oil on canvas, 70 × 42 inches
Purchase 42.15



Charles Demuth

In *My Egypt*, Demuth transformed a cement grain storage elevator in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, into a symbolic icon of America's industrial and agricultural might. By bathing the structures in an almost supernatural light, and likening them through the painting's title to the ancient pyramids, he has made his own monument of enduring vitality.

The beams of light can evoke the sun, blessings from heaven, or the excitement of a Hollywood premiere. Whatever the association, they remain effective in sweeping dynamic rays of force across the static verticals and giving the buildings a commanding authority. Why does our low viewpoint and the severely limited palette dominated by blue and gray also contribute to this authoritative presence? As painted, the frontal view of the storage elevators, which suggests a cathedral façade, conveys a sense of monumentality and permanence. Why does frontality create this effect?

Paintings such as *My Egypt* placed Demuth in the front rank of the artists called Precisionists, who selected mechanical and industrial forms as subjects. Attracted to Cubism but reluctant to fragment objects as the Europeans (and Stuart Davis) had done, they evolved a more realistic American version, using symbols of progress and productivity that were already geometric in design, and stylizing them into powerful emblems of American achievement and optimism.

My Egypt, 1927
Oil on composition board, 35¾ × 30 inches
Purchase, with funds from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.172



Edward Hopper

As abstract art gained ascendancy in twentieth-century America, Edward Hopper remained a staunch champion of representational painting. But such was his sensitivity to abstract structure in the observable world that many modernists continued to admire his work. Although he unsentimentally described the American scene as a "chaos of ugliness," his steady inquiry into the psychological truths of the American environment led to works of a stark, haunting beauty.

Lonely figures marking time in an indifferent urban landscape became a Hopper trademark; few artists surpassed him as an observer of what Thoreau called "lives of quiet desperation." There was once a figure in a second-floor window of *Early Sunday Morning*, but Hopper painted it out. The people are, in a sense, offstage, waiting their call, while the fire hydrant and the barber pole stand like comic sentinels. Hopper had a true theater- and movie-lover's taste for dramatic light that heightens the sense of poignant expectations. What makes the light dramatic? How does it suggest the time of day? How has he used light to avoid monotony? If Hopper is a realist, why has he made the shop signs illegible?

Hopper considered abstract art unnecessarily limited: "The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form and design. . . . Painting will have to deal more fully . . . with life and nature's phenomena before it can again become great." Do you agree? Are any of the abstract artists seen in these galleries dealing with "nature's phenomena?"

Early Sunday Morning, 1930
Oil on canvas, 35 × 60 inches
Purchase, with funds from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.426



Stuart Davis

Davis called these works "color-space compositions," and if their upbeat tempo and witty improvisations remind us of American jazz, that would suit the artist just fine. The paintings also aspire to the striking immediacy and punch of a modern city's landscape, graphically filled with signs, words, and linear patterns. The title, *The Paris Bit*, humorously refers to the mandatory visit of "provincial" American artists to the city that gave birth to the achievements, and the myth, of modernism.

The red, white, and blue color scheme, here combined with black, links the flags of France and the United States. Identifying the stylized objects and tracing the sometimes cryptic meaning of the words is a game that Davis seems to encourage. The "28" in the upper left refers to 1928, the date of his first Paris visit. "Lines Thicken," Davis tells us at the top of the canvas, but the strongest linear element in the picture is the narrowest, seemingly unbroken line—sometimes white, sometimes black—that never varies in width and runs through the entire painting. What is its function? Although *The Paris Bit* presents an entire street, why does it seem more flat than the room in Max Weber's *Chinese Restaurant*?

While most artists who treated American subjects did so in a representational manner, turning their backs on European modernism, Stuart Davis treated all subjects in an advanced abstract style, adapted from Cubism but transformed by his personal vision. It made him a hero to many young artists of the thirties and forties, and later Pop artists, attracted to advertising and popular culture, admired the graphic vigor of his work.

The Paris Bit, 1959
Oil on canvas, 46 × 60 inches
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 59.38



Alexander Calder

Although *Roxbury Flurry* seems to be entirely abstract, its flat, moving shapes evolved from the world around us. Calder wrote: "I do a lot of things that look like snowflakes. The round white disc is pretty much a standard thing in life—snowflakes, money, bubbles, cooking devices."

Drawing on his training as an engineer and on a belief that art was too static to reflect a world of movement, Calder began making mobiles in 1930. Although he usually avoided the spatial illusions of representational art, he achieves one here by varying the size of the disks. What is the illusion? Calder's mobiles had originally been mechanized, but the movement in *Roxbury Flurry* is generated by us. Walk around the mobile and see how it responds to the body's motion. How does this change our relationship to the work of art?

Calder said: "When everything goes right a mobile is a piece of poetry that dances with the joy of life and surprises." Calder himself could not predict in advance all the complexity of a mobile in motion, so that chance itself becomes a creative tool, like more traditional chisels and brushes.

Willem de Kooning

The Dutch-born de Kooning once described New York City as a "no-environment," contrasting its constant change and violence with more stable societies of the past. Such anxiety could explain the frenzied, seemingly mutilated figure in *Woman and Bicycle*. Admirers of de Kooning's abstractions of the late 1940s were shocked when the artist "returned" to the figure, evolving a style that shed the conventions of the past (including modernist approaches such as Cubism) while sustaining the vigor of his abstract work.

De Kooning depicts his subject as if moving past it, yet seeing everything; we sense that both he and the woman are in motion, and somehow time is passing. Two pairs of hands, two mouths (or is it a necklace?), parts of a bicycle—where does the woman's body end and her surroundings begin? How does he use the direction and speed of brushstrokes to suggest her action of removing a shirt from her shoulders? Can you enjoy this work without tracing all the figurative elements?

De Kooning's earlier works had amply demonstrated his talent as a superb draftsman, able to render forms with naturalistic conviction. If he here seems to be fighting his own virtuosity, it is because he felt that a painter must constantly sacrifice the beautiful effect in the search for something stronger, something more expressive. Do violence, distortion, and raw power speak more directly to the emotions? Why?

Roxbury Flurry, c. 1948
Painted sheet metal and wire,
100 × 96 × 1/8 inches
Gift of Louisa Calder 77.85

Woman and Bicycle, 1952–53
Oil on canvas, 76½ × 49 inches
Purchase 55.35



Franz Kline

In 1949, Franz Kline, a figurative painter, was startled to see how the enlargement of his drawings with a projector transformed them into gigantic black strokes. The painter Elaine de Kooning described what then happened: "He began to work on sheets of newspaper with a three-inch housepainter's brush and black enamel. . . . Then came the six- or eight-foot canvases, the five-gallon cans of paint and the big, black images with the bulk and force and the momentum of the old-fashioned engines that used to roar through the town where he was born."

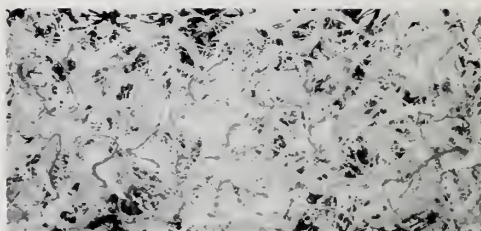
Like other artists of his time, Kline rejected the practice of outlining and then "filling in" the forms in a painting: he wanted to make them read as immediate, uncalculated marks of the artist's will, expressed through gesture, even if they had been planned in advance or adjusted on the canvas. Up close to *Mahoning*, the effort shows: we sense that a battle has taken place between black and white. The black, fiercely assertive, clearly wins. How does the white area still serve an important function in the composition? What kind of space do the hurtling lines create?

Mahoning is an Ohio county which, at the time of Kline's birth in nearby western Pennsylvania, was a center of American steel production. The artist once said that it was natural for people to see elements of reality in his work. Do any visual associations suggest themselves? Like all non-objective works, however, *Mahoning* must stand or fall on its purely formal, abstract qualities. How did you respond to the painting before knowing to what the title referred?

Mahoning, 1956

Oil on canvas, 80 × 100 inches

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 57.10



Jackson Pollock

"Abstract" refers to art without representational subject matter and "expressionism" to art charged with emotional energy; hence the term "Abstract Expressionism" was coined to describe such works as Jackson Pollock's *Number 27*. Abstract Expressionism drew inspiration from many sources, the most important of which was Surrealism—the work of European artists who were trying to achieve new forms of expression by letting unconscious impulses flow in a kind of automatic creation.

In most traditional painting, line describes and defines form—a person, tree, or building, for example. Does Pollock's line describe anything? He created this all-over composition by placing the canvas on the floor and then walking around it as he poured and flung paint from cans onto the surface. The endless complexity of line and motion established a new kind of space by blocking our efforts to visually move in and out, as in traditional pictorial space.

Pollock's exploration of motion in painting was as extraordinary as Calder's in sculpture. Pollock said of his work: "When I am painting I have a general notion as to what I am about. I *can* control the flow of paint; there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end." Does he literally mean "no accident" or no accident beyond his control? When you look at a work of art, do you look for a beginning and an end?

Number 27, 1950

Oil on canvas, 49 × 106 inches

Purchase 53.12



David Smith

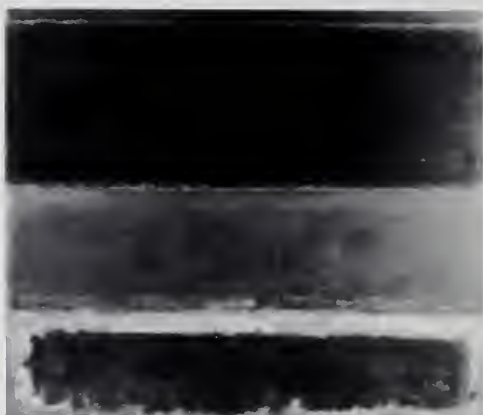
David Smith, although trained as a painter, eventually created welded metal sculptures that made him the most influential American sculptor of the century. He once said of steel, his favorite material, that it "possesses little art history. What associations it possesses are those of this century: power, structure, movement, progress, suspension, destruction, brutality."

In the midst of the four Smith sculptures in this gallery, however, the mood is more joyous and whimsical than destructive or brutal. They are all involved in various ways with motion, from the early *Hudson River Landscape*, where Smith records his train travels, to the fleeting movement of *Running Daughter*, and the tumbling forms of *Lectern Sentinel*. The sculptures are increasingly abstract, but even in *Cubi XXI*, completed a year before his death, there is an echo of a human figure leaning precariously on a support. The surfaces, burnished with a grinder, are as active with motion as the canvases of Smith's Abstract Expressionist friends. The bright, lively motion introduces the human touch and a lightness of spirit to the rigid form.

When asked for whom he made his art, Smith answered, "for all who approach it without prejudice," a sentiment that might be echoed by many artists who work in abstract styles, but who hope to communicate to a wider audience. Is it difficult to approach a work without prejudice? Do the representational references in Smith's earlier, less abstract works make them easier to appreciate than *Cubi XXI*?

Cubi XXI, 1964

Stainless steel, 119½ inches high
Collection of Howard and Jean Lipman;
on extended loan



Mark Rothko

The glowing spiritual energy of Mark Rothko's *Four Darks in Red* compels intimate reflection as passionately as the dramatic gestures of other Abstract Expressionists, such as Willem de Kooning or Jackson Pollock, demand a physical response. Rothko said he painted on a large scale because he wanted to be "very intimate and human." Painting a small picture, he felt detached, outside the experience; "you paint the larger picture, you are in it."

Approaching the painting, its monumental stillness makes the gallery seem quieter. The slow, gradual layering of transparent color traces the artist's hesitations as he hovered his darks against the light. It is abstraction drenched with nature; we feel the horizon, and the light glowing behind dark clouds. Clouds can be a thousand shapes, and they drift away, but Rothko's bands of red-soaked dark stay, trembling at the edges with the imminence of becoming something else.

Rothko came to abstraction by a long road that began with isolated figures in urban settings. Feeling confined by the figure's immobility, he moved toward abstraction and eventually to paintings that "began as an unknown adventure in an unknown space." After Rothko, many artists turned from the "unknown adventure" toward an art with more clearly defined limits. Can we sense, in these galleries, when artists are executing planned designs, and when they are exploring "unknown spaces"?

Four Darks in Red, 1958

Oil on canvas, 102 × 116 inches
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the
Whitney Museum of American Art, Mr. and Mrs.
Eugene M. Schwartz, Mrs. Samuel A. Seaver, and
Charles Simon 68.9



Barnett Newman

The impact of Newman's work is so strong that it takes a while before we begin to realize all the traditional elements of art that he has cast out, such as narrative and representation; or even more modernist practices such as gestural brushstrokes, multiple points of view, distortion, or the dream world of the Surrealists. Newman's paintings seem so simple that they appear to be "about" themselves, seeking the mystery and the sublime authority of ancient icons.

Day One is part of a series of four canvases that envision the process of creation. (*Day Before One* was predominantly blue.) A painting with such minimal surface activity and detail challenges all our expectations and leaves us staring into an idea of the sun. Gradually we grow conscious of the vertical edges, which no longer frame a receding space. How do these thin stripes, which Newman called "zips," function in the composition as elements affecting our perception of space? Is the dominant experience of the painting a sensual or a spiritual one?

Newman was convinced that the First Man after *Day One* was an artist. "Man's first expression . . . was a poetic outcry . . . of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void. . . . The purpose of man's first speech was an address to the unknowable." Newman's challenge to the unknowable, made on fields of color with uncompromising conviction, made him a primary influence on the generation of abstract artists to follow.

Josef Albers

At Black Mountain College and later at Yale, Josef Albers exerted a remarkable influence on art education in the area of color study. The *Homage to the Square* series, which occupied him for the last quarter century of his life, carries with it the zeal of a great teacher determined to open eyes about the interaction of color.

"A color is almost never seen as it really is . . . making color the most relative medium in art." In the painting, how do the following factors influence your perception of a color as advancing, receding, or otherwise acting upon surrounding colors: the color itself; its placement on the canvas; the proportion of the surface it covers; its intensity; and its degree of lightness or darkness. Are these perceptions permanent or do they alter as you move away or toward the work?

"Art parallels life," wrote Albers. "It is not a report on nature or an intimate disclosure of inner secrets. Color . . . behaves like man . . . first in self-realization and then in the realization of relationships with others." For Albers, ethics and aesthetics were one. He could not admire a painting if he considered that the colors in one part were indifferent to the fate of colors in another part. "Does this part," he would say to his students, "know what's going on over here?"

Day One, 1951–52

Oil on canvas, 132 × 50¼ inches
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the
Whitney Museum of American Art 67.18

Homage to the Square: Gained, 1959

Oil on board, 40 × 40 inches
50th Anniversary Gift of Fred Mueller 79.36



Ellsworth Kelly

During the 1950s, when Abstract Expressionists such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock dominated the New York art scene, a group of younger abstract painters began to reject the practice of manipulating paint for expressive ends. Ellsworth Kelly brought a particularly cool elegance to the balancing of large shapes on immaculate canvases with forms delineated by razor-sharp contours.

Abstract painters tend to be passionate about such issues as which of two shapes asserts itself as the foreground "figure" or recedes as the "ground"; sometimes they are locked together in striking tension. Kelly finds the most eloquent shapes, hones them with great refinement, and sends them arcing, bending, or floating across a ground that is often reluctant to stay back. He bases his work on observation; *Atlantic* began when he noticed the curve of shadows falling across a book while he was riding a bus. Why has he made the shadows white? How does the shape of each form affect our reading of it as figure or ground? Does the title *Atlantic* suggest something in nature besides shadows?

Kelly's eagerness to bend light and space in unexpected ways also helped him develop into one of the major sculptors of our time. The French painter Georges Braque also made sculpture because he "wanted to see the other side of the canvas." For abstract artists like Kelly who are attracted to three-dimensional form but reject the idea of painting its illusion on the canvas with light and shadow, sculpture is the inviting and challenging alternative.

Atlantic, 1956

Oil on canvas, two panels, 80 × 114 inches (overall)

Purchase 57.9



George Segal

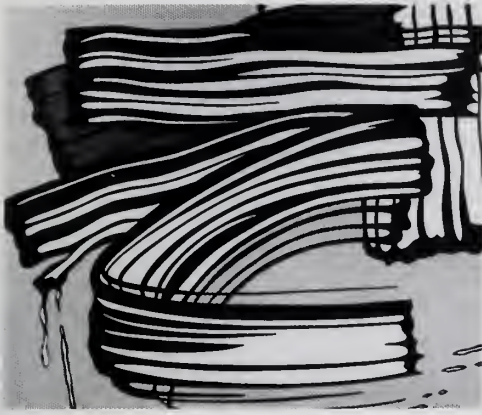
Few artists since Edward Hopper have focused with such eloquence as George Segal on the poignant isolation of people surrounded by the heedless rush of the city. Although he casts directly from models, the stark whiteness of the figures separates them from our environment, making them both bluntly contemporary versions of antique sculpture and ghostly inhabitants of a dream space.

The closed eyes of the figures, required by the artist's casting process, make it appear as if they had paused to pray before crossing a New York street. The anonymous, contradictory commands of the traffic light seem to have frozen them. The light's commonplace actuality, a necessary feature of our lives, takes on a sinister aspect of Big Brother control. Do we sense that the artist is emphasizing individual loneliness, the limits of freedom, or a common human bond?

Segal said of this work: "People moving around seem to be in some kind of hypnotic dream state. They seem to be programmed. I wondered: how would it be to see a group of people waiting on a street corner for a light to change? What would they look like?" These questions enable us to understand the artist's creative process, as he chose his subjects (including his wife's brother-in-law), found the traffic light (he admired its sculptural form), and placed all of them in a familiar, but tense, juxtaposition.

Walk, Don't Walk, 1976

Plaster, cement, metal, painted wood, and electric light, 104 × 72 × 72 inches
Purchase, with funds from the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc.; Seymour M. Klein, President; the Gilman Foundation, Inc.; the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc.; and the National Endowment for the Arts 79.4



Roy Lichtenstein

Artists have always used the art of the past as subject matter, appropriating earlier styles and ideas, compositions and poses of figures with attitudes that range from reverence to mockery. For Pop artists such as Lichtenstein, the widespread reproduction of art in books and magazines had, for better or worse, turned the images of masterpieces into everyday clichés. Reflecting this situation, Lichtenstein has adapted several famous modern paintings in his personal “comic-book” idiom.

In *Little Big Painting*, Lichtenstein makes a vigorous design that is also a sly comment on the sweeping, dramatic brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionists such as Franz Kline and on his own youthful style. Since visible brushwork was considered evidence of the artist’s hand and the mark of personal identity, Lichtenstein here poses the most direct challenge by removing any “hand-made” look, de-personalizing the motion of the strokes with cool, stylized lines and dots derived from the Ben-Day printing process.

Lichtenstein first came to public notice with images of Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, and Popeye. His addition of Abstract Expressionism to this group may say something about the style’s acceptance in popular culture. What does Lichtenstein’s depiction of one form of art in the vocabulary of another reveal about his attitude toward the changing styles of twentieth-century art?

Richard Estes

The development of the camera in the nineteenth century was both a threat to artists and a liberating force. On the one hand, the camera seemed to be a more accurate recorder of reality; on the other, it freed artists from the obligation to render that reality with precision. For the painter today, the camera or projector is a tool, as familiar in many studios as paints and brushes. And it is sometimes used to create a new kind of precision, a “hyper-reality” known as Photo-Realism.

The photo-like image in Estes’ *Ansonia*—named for the hotel on Manhattan’s West Side that appears in the background—resembles that of traditional spatial illusionism on a two-dimensional surface, with lines and planes receding to a common vanishing point to define deep space. How does the vertical division of the picture, with the real street at left and its partial reflection at right, contribute to or deny this illusion of space? We know that Estes based *Ansonia* on two photographs he took at the scene. Could this explain the clarity and sharpness of focus everywhere, even in the distance? Does this all-over focus make space seem deeper or more shallow? How does this “hyper-reality” differ from normal visual perception?

Estes uses realism to transport a New York street to another realm, where everything stops on command, the bustling populace has withdrawn, and the buildings line up for the artist’s inspection like apples on a studio table. From the point of view of the artist, everything is equally important or unimportant, and a plant has as much personality as a pedestrian.

Little Big Painting, 1965
Oil on canvas, 68 × 80 inches
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the
Whitney Museum of American Art 66.2

Ansonia, 1977
Oil on canvas, 48 × 60 inches
Purchase, with funds from Frances and
Sydney Lewis 77.33

